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SERMON CCCC I.

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A REVIVAL OF RELIGION, GOD'S WORK.

"It is time for thee, Lord, to work, for they have made void thy law."—
PSALM 119, 126.

THIS remarkable psalm contains a full expression of christian sentiment on a variety of important subjects. The most prominent thought contained in it, presented under various aspects, is the unspeakable excellence of the divine law. David's piety appeared in the deep interest he felt for the honor of this law, for he was tremblingly alive to every violation. His were no ordinary feelings, "*rivers of waters run down mine eyes because men keep not thy law;*" while his love in all its freshness and strength centered upon its glorious Author, his tears flowed for the sins of the people. The prevalence of iniquity filled him with solicitude for the cause of God, for when iniquity abounds the love of many waxes cold. Despairing of help from man he turns to God. In the text there is a fact stated by way of complaint, "*they have made void thy law;*" and a desire expressed that God would arise in his glory and put forth his power for the vindication of his honor. Or, it may be simply a declaration;—if so, it might be understood as referring to a work of judgment in which the violators of the law would be punished. But it is generally supposed to relate to a work of mercy in converting sinners from the error of their ways. Then it would teach us this sentiment, *that the work of God often commences in a time of great declension.*

It is thus explained by the Assembly of Divines, "the prophet sheweth, that when the wicked have brought all things to confusion,

and God's word to utter contempt, then it is God's time to help and send remedy." We shall keep this sentiment in view in illustrating the text.

1. When do men make void God's law?

It is obvious the Psalmist refers to a period of more than ordinary sinfulness. There was something in the tone of public sentiment, in the state of public morals, which peculiarly affected him and led him to present the case to God. Such a state of things is thus described by the prophet. "*None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth. Judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off; for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter.*"

To make void, is virtually to annul, to destroy the force of, to render ineffectual. It is an expression that usually has reference to an act passed, or to an instrument containing the terms of a contract.

1. To make void the law of God is to deny its authority and obligation.

The divine law is a transcript of the divine character and is an expression of the will of its Author. It was written by the finger of God. They who reject the Scriptures as a revelation from God, make void the law. There are those who acknowledge its excellency and reasonableness, who even admit its authenticity, and still deny its divine authority. It is not merely because it secures the interests of civil society, nor yet because it defines the rights and protects the property of men in their various relations that it is called good, but because it is the standard and the instrument of holiness; all those who make light of the penalty, who do not tremble at the divine word, make void the law.

2. To obscure or explain away its meaning, is to make void the law. There are those who do not assail the authority, who, nevertheless neutralize the force, of the law. They put a false construction upon it. This includes all errorists. There is a true interpretation. The law was given to be obeyed, of course to be understood. The exercise of unbiassed reason, with the aid of the lights of history and the former experience of others, together with fervent prayer, and above all the teaching of the Spirit, will lead to the true meaning. "*If any man will do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine.*" The decisions of the judgement are greatly influenced by the state of the heart. The common refuge of error that the powers of the human mind are limited, will be swept away. The limitation of reason, may be the cause of imperfect views, but cannot be an excuse for erroneous views. Error is more the sin of the heart than the fault of the head. A right heart will find the truth.

The Bible is made up of doctrines, of prohibitions and of precepts; all of which are enforced by penalties. As a love for the truth and a right state of feeling will lead to a discovery and approval of the truth; so an unhumbled heart will dispose one to pervert the right ways of the Lord. Hence it will be found true that a man who has fallen into one error is wrong on other points. If we may put our own construction on one part of the Bible we may on another, and thus it will be made to speak according to fancy, or prejudice, or selfishness, and we shall not be held by its claims, nor awed by its penalties. Large portions of nominal Christendom make void the law. Its true spiritual meaning is obacured, its direct influence weakened.

3. There are some who make void the law by *traditions*. This was true of the Jews in Christ's time. Addressing the Scribes and Pharisees, who laid great stress upon the traditions of the Elders, the Saviour says, "*ye have made the commandment of God of none effect by your traditions.*"

Nor was this method of setting aside the law confined to the Scribes and Pharisees. It has prevailed extensively in the Romish Church. Nor there only. Human authority is often set up against divine. Not unfrequently do error and immorality find countenance in opinions expressed by commentators and church courts. Many sentiments have gained currency which weaken moral obligation and neutralize divine truth.

When the authority of the Bible is let down, the public conscience will sleep, the love of many who profess godliness will wax cold, religion will exert but a feeble influence on those without, places of amusement will be frequented, the passions will seek indulgence, the young will be impatient of restraint, daring impiety will abound, men will cast off fear and restrain prayer, profaneness, intemperance and sabbath-breaking will become frequent and open. An apathy which neither judgments nor mercies break up settles upon the public mind; the ministrations of the gospel are ineffectual, the feasts of Zion are deserted, while haunts of sin and halls of mirth are thronged.

II. *The only hope of the Church, at such a time, is in God. It is time for THEE, Lord, to work.*

The minister is often discouraged. The church has declined in spite of all his prayers and exertions. Notwithstanding his ministrations iniquity has increased; while he has stretched out his hand no man regarded; as he surveys the wide desolation, the prevalence of error, the rush into sin, the recklessness of the young, the idolatry of the world, knowing the inveteracy of habit, the unbelief of the heart, the artifice of Satan, he is ready to despond. He is often tempted to ask, *can these dry bones live?* He has

been taught his own insufficiency. The word preached does not profit. There is neither a hearing ear, nor an understanding heart.

Those associated with him as officers in the church are inoperative; having gradually lost their interest in the welfare of Zion they have been diverted from their appropriate work, and transferred their zeal and activity to the business of the world. They are often absent from the place of prayer, they do not mourn because the feasts of the church are deserted. They yield to apathy and unbelief.

The body of the church are lukewarm. All hands hang down. Amidst the reign of selfishness, all seek their own and not the things which are Jesus Christ's. Affecting appeals produce only a temporary effect. The tares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unprofitable. The bleakness and the barrenness of winter, are a fit emblem of the spiritual state of such a church.

Is it not evident therefore, if any thing is done, *God must take the work into his own hands.* "Man's extremity is God's opportunity."

The resuscitation of nature after the desolation of winter is not more the work of God than the quickening of the graces of his people after a season of declension.

Here it may be proper to mention, *How God works.*

1. *By means of his Providence.* A sudden death has often proved the occasion of deep seriousness to a circle of friends. A good work has sometimes commenced in colleges by the death of a young man. A visitation of sickness not unfrequently is the means of convincing men of the need of a Saviour. A public calamity has impressed a whole community with a sense of sin. In this way the general apathy has been broken up, attention has been turned to the things of religion, and multitudes have been converted from the error of their ways.

2. Sometimes the work of God is revived by *unexpected means.*

A gross offender, a bold blasphemer, or an open opposer of religion is converted. The suddenness and magnitude of the change convince many of the great power of God; they see it and fear. The moment men begin to reflect, to bring home the subject of personal obligation to their own hearts, they will find enough in every day's occurrence, to impress the conscience with a sense of guilt.

The prostration of one lofty oak betokens the presence of a strong wind, and others in the vicinity will be shaken. Often does God take this method to awaken the stout-hearted, and to arouse his

church. Sometimes a revival of religion begins by the quickening of some humble member of the church, while the great body are indifferent. Whenever we see one possessed of a spirit of prayer or deeply affected by the exposure of sinners out of Christ, if there be any tenderness left in our hearts, or any regard for the welfare of Zion, some interest will be awakened, some compunction will be felt.

More frequently, perhaps, the good work commences in consequence of a powerful sermon, accompanied by the energy of the Holy Spirit, or by means of a system of pastoral visitation.

Although the wind bloweth where it listeth, still we find there is some degree of order in the operations of the Spirit; it is important therefore to observe the ordinary means which are blessed of God to the promotion of his work.

III. We proceed to the main point in this discourse, that God often interposes and begins his work, at such a time, when men make void his law.

We might expect that judgment would begin, since the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness of men. But instead of wrath he remembers mercy. We refer to some facts. We have an illustration in the reformation under Asa. After the separation of the ten tribes, Judah, instead of trusting in the Lord they fell away to idolatry. Altars were erected to strange gods, groves were planted, and all the abominations of the heathen were committed. As a natural consequence every species of immorality was practised. In the midst of this darkness and declension, Asa was raised up, who, in opposition to the course of his father, removed the offensive rites of the heathen and restored the worship of the true God. The great change that was effected under Josiah commenced at a time of peculiar degeneracy. The nation appeared to be on the verge of ruin. The temple was desecrated, the worship of God wholly neglected—the law was lost, the priests were corrupt; at the lowest point of declension, a copy of the law was found amid the rubbish with which the temple was defiled. The reading of this book awakened the conscience of the pious king; he collected all the people and caused them to enter into covenant to repent of their sins and seek the God of Israel. “*And Josiah took away all the abominations out of all the countries that pertained to the children of Israel, and made all that were present in Israel to serve, even to serve the Lord their God.*”

The reformation under Ezra commenced at a time of deep declension; and when did the Jewish church exhibit greater laxity of sentiment, or looseness of morals, than at the season of Pontecost, when so many thousands in Jerusalem were converted to God? At the period of the Reformation from Popery, profligacy

of manners had reached the highest pitch, the most flagrant sins were committed under sanction of the church.

The same is true of the second great reformation under Wesley and Whitfield in England, Edwards and Tennant in America. Religion had deeply declined and iniquity prevailed. The few pious that were left mourned in secret places. Those who lifted a warning voice and attempted to break up the slumbers of Zion, experienced the most determined opposition. In all these instances light emerged out of darkness, order sprung out of confusion.

It is interesting to inquire, *why* God begins to work at such a time? The fact is undoubted.

1. To show that it is *the work of God*. Revivals of religion are often attributed to *human agency*. It cannot be doubted that many movements in the church, misnamed revivals of religion, are the result of human effort; nor are we to forget that by the foolishness of preaching men are made wise unto salvation.

That a true revival is not the work of man, is evident from the fact, that under human agency it declines. How often when the still small voice begins to awaken the conscience, and sinners begin to inquire what they must do to be saved, has some zealous but unwise hand been put forth to carry forward the work, some new methods have been devised, some new channels have been opened in which the increasing feeling might flow; mistaking the effect of novelty for the legitimate work of the Spirit, it was supposed the cause prospered, when in fact the work was marred.

Besides, how frequently are those professing christians who subsequently are aroused, and become useful, compelled to say, "*The Lord was in this place and we knew it not.*" If those who are represented as the agents of this work, its active executors, find themselves unexpectedly in the midst of thrilling scenes, it is evidently not the work of man. *It is not by might nor by power, not by human policy or strength, but by the Spirit of God*, the church is built up.

Revivals of religion have been ascribed to the influence of *sympathy*. It is a sufficient answer to say that sympathy never kindles by coldness. While it is equally unphilosophical and unscriptural to exclude all feeling from religion, it is true, that mere feeling is not religion; and some of those excitements which have been called revivals are not to be regarded as specimens of what we denominate the work of God.

Many ascribe revivals of religion to *enthusiasm*. Enthusiasm, as now used, is a vague word. The real enthusiast is carried away with a conceit that he is in a measure inspired. His imagination is heated, he places undue value on circumstantialia, while the main subject of interest is comparatively neglected. A revival of religion sometimes leads men of ardent temperament into enthusiasm, but how can such a state of mind be awakened by a valley of dry

bones, by anything in a community where men make void God's law?

When enthusiasm is chastened and sanctified it is a noble feeling, springing from right and sober views of truth and the relation of things.

While some ascribe these precious seasons to one cause, and some to another, (for there are always many surmises, and as we know, many objections and misrepresentations,) we may answer them all in the language of the Apostle Peter. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days," (saith God,) "I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh.

2. God begins to work at such a time, *to prevent the boasting of man.*

The true and proper effect of all success in the cause of God, is to humble us. Pride is natural to man. How ready are even the pious to feel some self-complacency in a revival of religion. The instruments employed to promote it are praised; the numbers are magnified, the results are heralded forth; in all which we have evidence enough of human weakness. This vaunting spirit the Apostle rebuked, *who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers, mere instruments, by whom ye believed?*

God is a jealous God, he begins and carries on his work in a way to stain the pride of the heart; in its commencement, in the selection of the means, it is manifest he designs that no flesh should glory in his presence.

Many are brought into the kingdom on whom man has expended all his power to no purpose. When early instruction failed, when reason and argument were ineffectual, by some humble instrumentality they were made to feel their guilt and danger. Some are arrested in the very depths of wickedness; having broken through every restraint, resisted every impulse, and plunged into every excess, while no human arm could reach their case, they are pricked in the heart, and led to ask, *what shall we do?*

Standing in the midst of such scenes, surrounded by such miracles of grace, how natural to exclaim, behold, *what hath God wrought!* Both the minister and the convert have occasion to say—"Not unto us, not unto us, O Lord, but unto thy name be all the glory, for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake."

The text may be regarded in the light of a prayer, it expresses the desire of David, and therefore suggests another interesting enquiry.

Why is it specially desirable that God should begin to work when men make void his law?

1. *To put a stop to sin, to arrest the tide of iniquity.* As we

have remarked, when men make void God's law, iniquity comes in like a flood, *then*, if ever, it is desirable that the Spirit of the Lord should lift up a standard against it. What a panic is felt, what a terror is struck through the ranks of the enemies of truth, when God's people begin to bestir themselves, when penitent for their sins, and exercising faith in the promises, they stir themselves up to take hold of the covenant. When the Spirit of God begins to pervade a place, arresting the thoughtless, filling the church with light and holiness, the bold transgressor begins to tremble, the wicked forsake the haunts of sin, the profane suppress their oaths, sabbath-breakers cease from their profanation of the holy day. Is it an evil and bitter thing to forsake the Lord? Is the prevalence of sin a calamity to be deprecated? Does sin destroy soul and body? Surely then it is desirable that the tide of death should be stopped; and nothing will so effectually stop it, as an outpouring of the Spirit.

Could all the crimes committed, the riotous scenes now existing in this place, the oaths and imprecations, the intemperance and sabbath-breaking, the levity and folly, be spread out before you; could you like the prophet have a view of the abominations wrought in the midst of us, would you not in tears exclaim, Is it *not* time for thee, Lord, to work? What will become of thy great name?

2. It is desirable for God to *begin* to work at such a time, to *vindicate the law*. When it is made void, its honor is in the dust, its authority is prostrated. In a revival of religion the law is vindicated in two ways,—by those who are *converted*, and by the *testimony of conscience in those not converted*.

By the law is the knowledge of sin. When the Spirit of God moves upon the heart, the awakened sinner begins to think on his ways, he reviews his life, his memory is quickened, all the things he has ever done rise up before him; he flies to the law, but it speaks in tones of condemnation, he trembles in view of its penalty; smiting on his breast, he cries "God be merciful to me a sinner." He feels that the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, but he is carnal, sold under sin. The law has gained its rightful ascendancy—and never again can he deny or doubt its authority.

And in relation to multitudes who never profess their attachment to Christ, who stand aloof from the Church, a revival has affected them; they have secretly trembled, the law has been brought home to the conscience, and though not humbled, still prone to evil, and unwilling to break off their sins by righteousness, they never afterwards indulge in many former sins. Conscience has been enlightened if not purified; the heart has been moved, if not subdued; the law has been honored, if not obeyed; good therefore was done not only by bringing sinners to Christ, but by restraining others from sin.

3. *For the manifestation of the divine glory.* "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." The deeper the darkness the more light is required to dissipate it. If the law is in the dust and iniquity abounds, if apathy and formality pervade the church, and everything wear the aspect of gloom and desolation, the power and wisdom and grace of God are peculiarly manifest in raising up the decayed foundations, in quickening the conscience, in bringing men to repentance. When we see the rigor of winter dissolving, the earth which had been desolate and frost-bound, teeming with life, the verdure of spring taking the place of barrenness, we are filled with admiration of the grandeur and greatness of the Author of Nature. So when we witness the transformation of moral character consequent upon a work of grace, see men who were possessed of every evil spirit, vile, licentious, abominable, clothed in their right minds, pure, teachable, obedient, benevolent, we are still more affected by the display of power and grace. A regard for the divine honor no less than a spirit of benevolence would lead us to desire a revival of pure and undefiled religion.

4. Nor should we overlook the interest of the Church.

When men make void God's law, it is evidence of the low state of religion in the church. If there is gross wickedness without, there is criminality within; if in one community iniquity abounds in the other there must be much that is wrong. Hence we find in seasons of declension jealousies exist, divisions take place, selfishness triumphs, Zion languishes; the current of evil sets in deep and strong; nothing can save a church thus fallen into sin but a revival of religion; nothing else will heal the divisions and soothe the jealousies, nothing else will dissipate the despondency and render effectual the efforts of the pious.

Jesus promised his Spirit to the Church as the sum of all his blessings; the promise of the Father is the crowning gift. Who can enumerate all the benefits of an outpouring of the Spirit? It is to the church what the warmth of the Sun and the influence of the showers are to the earth. Its value is learned in two ways, by receiving, and by being deprived of it. A church that has been visited with a season of refreshing, resuscitating its graces, expanding its charities, reviving its hopes, swelling its joys, multiplying its capabilities of usefulness, can never forget the favor; such a bright spot in its history will be referred to with gratitude, while any of its precious fruits remain to bless the world.

And when a season of darkness ensues in which zeal declines, the word preached does not profit, the pulse of piety beats feebly; the spiritual parts of the Church, remembering the days departed in which the arm of the Lord was revealed, will weep in secret places; they know by its loss the value of the blessing and cry, "Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy saints may rejoice in thee?"

Thus I have attempted to explain the terms used in this to x to illustrate the sentiment it contains, "that God often interpose at a time of great sinfulness," and have assigned some reasons for the divine conduct, or why such an interposition is desirable.

REMARKS.

I. We learn the duty of a church in a time of declension.

Some vainly imagine that nothing can be done. Influenced by their feelings, yielding to apathy rather than to the word of God they say, the time has not come that the Lord's house should be rebuilt. Such only seek an excuse. As well might the husbandman say that the season of harvest is the only time for him to labor, that at other seasons of the year he may fold his hands. Every season has its appropriate duties.

Surely when men make void Gods' law it is not a time to slumber. The danger is too great for the Church to sleep at her post.

1. *We ought to ascertain the extent of the evil.* When Nehemiah went up to Jerusalem to repair the house of the Lord, before he commenced active operations he went out by night and surveyed by the light of the moon the extent of the desolation, that he might ascertain what was to be done. The responsibility of the christian is too great, and life is too short to allow him to recline in ease. If God withholds his blessing from the word preached, if the ways of Zion mourn, something is wrong, and all who are attached to her interests and seek her prosperity should lose no time in searching for the cause. Each member should be visited, and be urged to self-examination and repentance.

2. *It is our duty to call upon God in a time of declension.* He is the only hope of the church at such a time. If we have forsaken the Lord and he has withdrawn the tokens of his favor, we must return to him and humble ourselves under his mighty hand. Seasons of humiliation should be appointed. As all our help must come from God, he has taught us that he will be inquired of by the house of Israel—special prayer should be offered. The low and languishing state of Zion should be spread out before the Lord in the closet, at the family altar, in the social circle, as well as in the public sanctuary. "There shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

3. *We ought to come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty.* While all eyes should be directed to heaven, we must

remember that a blessing is to be expected only in the performance of duty. The very fact that God giveth the increase renders it indispensable that Paul should plant and Apollos water. The great duty of "*working out our salvation*," is predicated upon the assurance that "it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Some render the text, "It is time to work for thee, O Lord." When many are at ease in Zion, settled upon their lees, when iniquity abounds, and the authority of the law is disregarded, it is time for christians to awake to righteousness, to put on the whole armor of God; regard for the divine glory, sympathy for the mourning ways of Zion, compassion for perishing sinners should lead the friends of Christ to summon every energy and engage in the work of the Lord with zeal.

2. This subject furnishes a *solemn test of character*. When all are excited, in the midst of stirring scenes, it is difficult to discriminate, but when the love of many waxes cold, when men make void God's law, there is no room for sympathy, then we may ascertain the strength of principle, the depth of attachment; we see how *real* christians feel in a time of declension—they mourn in secret, they are concerned for the honor of the law, for the institutions of the gospel; like Esther they cannot endure the thought of the destruction coming upon their kindred—they weep before the Lord, confess their sins and humble themselves in the dust. If you would learn the feelings of true christians, read the 9th chapter of Daniel, the 9th of Ezra, or the language of the weeping prophet; "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" Says David, "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes because men keep not thy law."

But the formal believer, who has only a name to live, manifests no anxiety, the apathy of the church occasions no distress; if places of temptation are opened, so dangerous to the young, if the ways of Zion mourn because few come to her solemn feasts, he is not affected—he consults his ease and convenience; he has no faith in the efficacy of prayer; special efforts are looked upon with suspicion; every appeal is met with the reply that "God will carry on his own work." What a contrast to the feelings and conduct of the true christian.

What are *our* feelings? Men now make void God's law; it is a time of darkness and gloominess in Zion, the word preached does not take effect, circles of prayer are neglected. Death is carrying on his work—multitudes are living without God. How are we affected? Are we prepared to call upon God to begin to work? Does the condition of the church and the exposure of sinners so press upon our hearts that we have no rest? Does continual sorrow fill our bosom? I do not see how a christian can be happy when Zion mourns.

SERMON CCCCII.

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PROVIDENCE AND ITS TEACHINGS.

"I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things. For when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness."—Isai, xiv. 7.—xxvi. 9.

THE providence of God is co-extensive with his works. It is operative wherever there are beings to be controlled or material organizations to demand its powerful aid. Such is the doctrine of the first part of our text. I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. The same omnipotent energy that of old gave birth to light, and by the revolution of the orbs, created darkness, is still at work originating and controlling the prosperity or the adversity that attends on human action. Light and darkness are figures beautifully expressive of the prosperity and the adversity that here brightens and darkens around us. Peace and evil are terms equally significant of the absence or the presence, on the one hand of desolating temporal judgments, as war and pestilence and famine; on the other of those spiritual trials which destroy our mental serenity and make the soul sad. In reference to all these things it is the emphatic meaning of the text that the divine providence extends to them either a direct supervision or a positive control. It is not intended that their authorship is in *all* respects divine; for a thousand free agencies may have co-operated in their production; minds by the myriad may have thrown their purposes in this direction, and hands without number have labored for this effect. But it is asserted that through all the seemingly chaotic mass of volitions and acts and events, there runs the silver cord of the divine purpose, along which flashes the divine energy, and around which, by an unseen law, the shapeless materials are crystalized into order and beauty. It is asserted that he who was great enough to create, is great enough to govern, and that where he has deigned to act the part of author and architect he will not fail to play the sovereign and

maintain and direct the forces he has quickened. It is asserted, not indeed that sin is his creation, since *that*—the free product of a *creature's will*—is beyond the creative energy of a holy omnipotence and involves a moral impossibility; but that no being lives in his wide domain, from Gabriel down to the tiniest form beyond the revelation of the most potent lens of the microscope, on whom his eye is not fixed, in whose actions he has not some concern, and over whom he does not exercise either a wise, moral, or physical control; that over all the vast and countless events that occur on this footstool God has his hand, and that only as he permits do they ever manifest themselves. Against this doctrine of a universal providence, even when so stated as to acquit God of the authorship of sin and yet maintain his supremacy unimpaired, there are many and specious objections. But whenever we have a clear "Thus saith the Lord" on which to rest, we have little concern respecting the adverse conclusions of any merely human intellect. They are to the word of God when faithfully expounded, as the ravings of insanity to the established facts of science.

By some, the whole subject of providence is resolved into fixed natural laws; and when they have hidden themselves and the events of life behind some law of the natural world, they dream of having escaped the immediate overruling providence of the Almighty. They do not consider that a law is only a mode of operation; that the laws of nature are nothing less than Jehovah putting forth in various forms his own omnipotent energy; that as he has constituted them, so he must support them; that it is just as senseless to talk of a self-sustaining and a self-operating law of nature, as it is to speak of a self-sustaining man or bird; and that the moment you introduce the idea of God as ever present, holding up the world from annihilation, and preserving all its forces in action, then you have at once and fully before you the idea of that sublime providence, which, from a point infinitely elevated, surveys the wide field of matter and mind, and holds in his own hand the final links of those countless chains of causes that reach down to all the events of this terrestrial sphere. What if we cannot trace the mighty chain of causation directly up to Jehovah, we can follow it far away until it is lost to us in the darkness that encompasses the throne, and it needs only a christian faith with purged vision to discern behind the cloud the hand which grasps and wields it to effect his sublime purposes.

Others again, in their anxiety to vindicate the character of Jehovah from the authorship of sin, do practically surrender up the world to the reign of chance and sweep away the very idea of an efficient providence above us, without whose permission or agency no event ever transpires. Because they cannot solve the problem of free agency and divine sovereignty, harmoniously operating in the production of the various scenes of time, they will save the

freedom of man by annihilating the direct supremacy of God. They will cut what they cannot untie. They are not content to take these twin truths, as they are clearly revealed in this word of life, and leave the reconciliation of them to a world of loftier intelligence—a state of profounder thought. But why need we thus distort and dishonor the simple word of God, and issue an edict of dethronement against our Maker, and plunge our spirits in all the chaotic horrors of an Atheists dream? Shall the superficial arguments of an unenlightened reason—of a reason, which, however clear it may see within the circle of its own proper vision, is encompassed on all sides by a horizon beyond which it cannot penetrate—avail to overturn a divine Sovereignty, the *modes* of whose operation lie hid in that world of spiritual existence, where the adventurous foot of no incarnate spirit has ever trode? It will be time for us to admit the justness of such reasoning, either when we feel within ourselves the clashing of God's working with our freedom, or, entering into the hidden laboratory of the Almighty, we discern there no efficient forces for the control of a moral universe. But until *that* time shall come, let not the insect of an hour criticise the operations of infinity and pronounce the clear developments of his word inconsistent with those of his works.

"As if upon a full-proportioned dome,
On swelling columns heav'd, the pride of art!
A critic fly, whose feeble ray scarce spreads
An inch around, with blind presumption bold,
Should dare to tax the structure of the whole."

And when, in the sublime language of our prophet, it is uttered from the throne; "*I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil,*" then may we rejoice that there is a Providence above us, that extends itself not only to the good but also to the evil; not only to mercy but also to judgment; that the world is not surrendered to a soulless chance, blind, idiotic senseless; a chance which works without reason, is guided by no intelligence and labors for no end. To the pious heart it is a preeminently consoling truth, that God reigns, and that we may repose beneath the broad canopy of his universal providence.

If I am afflicted, it is no consolation to know that it is an accident; that I am the sport of a reasonless chance. I wish to know the purpose and the intent of my affliction; I wish to feel that a being infinite in goodness and wisdom has done it; to know that such an one has the power to limit the surges and tame their fury; my whole soul pants to have God manifest himself, as the great operator, when I stand beside the bed of anguish,—when I close the dying eye of friendship—when I witness the dread shock of conflicting forces—when I hear the shriek of agony as men in crowds, unshrouded and unconfined, pass suddenly into eternity—and

when my own tabernacle shakes and sways to and fro before the breath of death. Then we can rejoice that God reigns; that never a blow falls unknown to him; that as we love him, every event of his providence shall chastise or discipline, testing our fidelity or working out for us an exceeding weight of glory. Here, on this blessed truth, thus explained, we can rest; secure though thousands fall around us; patient though cast into the furnace; joyful though encompassed by tribulation; calm and even jubilant, though death should come to rend asunder the mortal from the immortal. Into the mysteries of providence I seek not to penetrate. All human speculations here are profitless, save as they may give to this truth its just position before men. There will come a time, when, with a clearer intelligence, we shall study it profoundly; when, amid different scenes and from a loftier position, it will form no small part of the ecstasy of heaven, to behold the wisdom of the Almighty reveal itself through all these seemingly intricate, conflicting, and dark events of time. But while we remain here on the footstool, it will be to us a subject too deep indeed to be fathomed by the longest line of our reason, yet a delightful and a reviving truth, that our God doth exercise a providence wide as creation, and minute as the smallest and lowliest of his creatures.

We are now prepared to follow out the teaching of the *second* part of our text. "When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." It speaks only of that part of divine providence which has to do with judgments. Now I understand the truth here asserted to be, that the designed effect, and in the main the actual effect, of the sterner providences of God, is to teach men the knowledge and the practice of righteousness. And in the development of this truth, I ask you to consider.

I. *First*, that the judgments of God are designed to set his moral government, in respect to sin, in a proper light before men.

Amidst overflowing goodness, when borne on the flood tide of prosperity and wafted forward by gentle gales, men cease to regard their own sinful condition, and the character of that moral government beneath which they live. They hear the threatenings of the Bible with indifference, so long as they see around no mighty demonstrations of the divine purpose to punish the guilty. When no trouble visits them, when no plague affrights them, then "pride compasseth them about as a chain," then "they set their mouth against the heavens and their tongue walketh through the earth." But when judgments come, they point men back to their sinful origin, and within to their sinful state. They are the clear teachings of a sin punishing God. They tell you, that it is only as man is guilty that he is condemned; that to set forth his character as righteous, and so unfold the righteousness of his government, God

visits us with pain and plunges us into affliction. Judgment wonderfully invigorates conscience, and imparts to it somewhat of its ancient and rightful authority. Then it convinces men of sin; then it arrays a violated law; then it echoes the declaration that the curse causeless shall not come. And thus the world learns to feel that under the just government above them, sin shall not go unpunished and crime shall yet be detected, and all the life of transgression shall meet with its fit and terrible reward.

There is just here, however, a nice point in the providence of God. It is incumbent on Jehovah, since this is merely a state of preparation and not of retribution, so to adjust his judgments and so to administer his providence, as neither on the one hand to *punish fully* all crime, nor on the other to let it wholly escape. For if men were punished all that they deserved here, then what need of another world fitted up and set apart for the special purpose of retribution? And if men were to experience no judgments following hard upon the heels of crime, then the utter impunity of the wicked, would breed in them the conviction, that the bosom of the infinite Jehovah did not swell with a deep abhorrence of sin, and that he neither designed to maintain a strictly righteous government here nor justly punish the guilty hereafter.

And, doubtless, this is in part the reason, why here there is such a mixture of mercy with judgment—why the wicked pass on in the enjoyment of so much prosperity, while every now and then a thunderbolt falls at their feet to teach them that God amidst all his kindness cannot forget, and will not have them forget, that they are sinners in need of repentance and the atoning blood of Christ, to save them from the approaching miseries of retributive justice. And this too is the reason why, although great and outrageous crime will in general, even in this world, bring down a measure of woe upon the guilty head, yet that sometimes we behold the contrast of a man most darkly depraved, passing prosperously through life and dying without pain, with that of a holy man living in the furnace and going up from the rack of suffering to the crown of glory. Henry the Eighth after a long reign, foul with pollution and wet with blood, goes out like a spent taper at the very summit of his prosperity; while Cranmer, the meek though imperfect christian, ascends to heaven in the flames of martyrdom. In all this we discern the wisdom of that providence which so distributes its judgments as to teach men both these great truths, that while this world is not a state of retribution, there is ahead of us, a scene of perfect retribution, when God the sin hater shall become the sin punisher, and judgment without mercy shall be suffered to carry into execution its full and fearful work. And every time you see or feel the divine judgments, you behold the demonstration of a holy moral government under which the transgressor must suffer in himself or by another. And every time you see a wicked man

pass on prosperously and a good man greatly afflicted, then do you behold a providence which points you forward to another world, where the balance shall be rightly adjusted; where the prosperous sinner will descend into the surges of despair, while the afflicted saint ascends to his glorious throne. Thus by the manner of dispensing his judgments, does God clearly intimate to us the righteousness of his character, and by so doing he urges men to the practice of righteousness and the putting on of that which he hath provided through the atoning work of his beloved son.

II. The judgments of God are sometimes designed to destroy an unwarranted confidence in man or in any of the great natural agents which he has subjected to his power. There is in us all a strong tendency to trust in an arm of flesh. And this disposition manifests itself not unfrequently in the too perfect repose we indulge in the power of man to control the forces of nature. As science and art increase our power to wield the great natural agencies for the advancement of our interest and the promotion of our pleasure; as one difficulty after another is overcome, and man, weak and insignificant though he be in stature, seems to have placed his foot upon the most tremendous forces of the physical creation, then distrust vanishes, then, forgetting a mightier hand—a sublimer intellect, the creature arrogates to himself the confidence and the power and the glory which belong solely to his Creator and Governor. And thus standing amid the triumphs of art, and elevated by the lofty flight of science far above the past, he treads the earth like one invested with omnipotence, to whose will or caprice the very elements are subject and whose fiat the most tempestuous of them all must play the part of an humble servitor.

The wind and the ocean are two of the strongest elements, whose united forces have been the terror of all the past. But to such perfection have we carried the art of ship-building, so compactly as well as beautifully are our vessels constructed, to please the eye and yet bid defiance to the rage of the waters; so finished has become the art of the seaman, so rapidly and with such exquisite tact is the canvass spread or folded like the wings of some beauteous sea bird; so grandly does the noble craft walk the ocean as if instinct with a life of her own, yielding to the slightest impulse of the breeze, or the motion of her helm; so fully has the sailor explored the ocean and the shore, and carried so high the knowledge of the heavens and the means of discerning, through the instruments with which genius has provided him, his position amid a boundless sea, that men cease to fear, as they are borne on the billows, and trusting in their power to triumph over these mighty elements on which their vessel floats and by which she is impelled, they lift not up the heart of confidence to Him who ruleth supreme over winds and waves. Our ocean is a noble highway on which

men embark by scores of thousands, fearless of the issue, because confident in an arm of flesh. And it must needs be that this broad deep of waters, the emblem of eternity, should now and then be stirred to its lowest depths in judgment, by the breath of the Almighty, and these grand and beautiful structures which art has willed to glorify as the highest reach of human skill in its mastery over these elements, should occasionally go down like lead into the bosom of the deep, for the very purpose of humbling the pride of man in his own works, and demonstrating the imperfection of that supremacy, which he boasts of wielding over the unfathomed ocean. Where now are the President, the United States, the Great Britain, with all of beauty, of intellect and manhood, that crowded their decks? Echo, from the cavern depths of the deep sea answers *here*; while the hoarse surges that beat and gambol above their submerged hulls, are the voice of Gods judgments declaring the impotence of human might—the folly of human wisdom. And God designs that these significant and appalling providences should lead us to feel that he alone sits regent above the forces of nature—that to him alone these elements are submissive, and that man should learn righteousness in cherishing a simple hearted faith in him as alone supreme.

Fire is an element of vital usefulness and vast force. Ordinarily it is regarded by man as wholly within his control. He employs it as his agent in ten thousand processes of art and comfort and luxury; at his bidding it ministers at his table, creates the heat of summer amidst the reign of winter, and drives his iron steeds and wooden leviathans, over continents and oceans. At times, warned by the past, he fortifies himself against its too exuberant activity, by self-created protections; and relying upon policies of insurance he rises to a presumptuous confidence in his own security. Then cometh the triumph of this long manacled element. Defying our most sleepless vigilance, bursting away from our most guarded fireside, it seizes suddenly upon our most precious treasures, it devours with appalling greediness alike the monuments of art, the mausoleums of buried glory and the humbler abodes of the poor. As it leaps from dwelling to dwelling, rioting in the palace and the warehouse with a seemingly infernal joy, until its black footprints are the sole index where once flourished the imperial city, and the protectors and the protected—the insurers and the insured—are all involved in one wide and utter ruin; then above the rear of that terrific power, is heard the voice of Jehovah rebuking the miserable confidence men have indulged in their own boasted mastery over this great element of the material world. New York and Pittsburg and Quebec on the land—the Lexington, the Pulaski, and the Missouri, on the water, are the fearful utterances of judgment addressed to the nation within a few years

past, which have started us from our fancied security, and made men tremble at the cry of fire.

Steam is another of those agents, which beyond all previous example, beyond even the most sanguine anticipations of the past, this age boasts of applying with the happiest effects to a thousand useful purposes. And certainly the triumph of art in this direction has been of the noblest character. It has changed the face of commerce; it has introduced a new element of national power and national prosperity; it has partially bridged the ocean and bound together continents; it has approximated distant cities and given to the press a power of spreading itself over the minds of millions in a day; and it has supplied a force susceptible of indefinite expansion in any direction and of application to innumerable purposes. It stands first in might and foremost in utility of all the beneficent creations which science has given to the world, in this or any previous age. But while art has effected all this, it has never yet been able in practice, so to master this monster power as to render it wholly innocuous. Committing ourselves to locomotives and steamboats, outstripping the wind through the impulsive power of this subtle and elastic fluid, and all confident in Captain, Pilot, Engineer, we forget that this same tremendous energy which now confined in one direction moves such immense masses with such fearful velocity, may by any one of a thousand casualties either burst away from his dungeon and rending his fetters deal death and woe among the hundreds who are subject to his power, or in the very rapidity of his flight, dash them with fatal violence upon the material objects that surround his path. Thus on our western rivers, we are so often startled by the report of some terrific explosion, while here on the quiet waters of our noble Hudson, our ears are assailed by the crash of wrecked steamers, and the rending of timbers and the agonizing shrieks of multitudes in their last mortal agony. And in this way does God in these judgments so alarming—so terrible, compel us to feel that he alone is the perfect master of this wonderful agent, and that when man commits himself to its power, he should first of all commit himself to Him who can restrain its violence. It is true that in most cases the fatal work may be traced back to the negligence or the imprudence of man. But who cannot see that, when a worm of the earth attempts to guide and control this mighty agent, he necessarily exposes himself to accidents the most frightful in character and fatal in result; against which the utmost prudence ordinarily attainable by man cannot guard; to which the most trivial circumstances may give birth and from which no earthly legislation, however wise in forecast and energetic in practice, can fully deliver him. With all the safeguards that experience has supplied, it is still true that secret flaws may exist; with all the vigilance that self-interest and the warning voice of the past may create, it is still true that men will have their unguarded hours;

with all our appliances to fortify ourselves against danger, it will still be true and must ever remain so, that when we avail ourselves of the might of such tremendous agents, until we share in the omniscience and omnipotence of God himself, we shall ever be exposed to accidents most terrible and fatal. And as Jehovah from time to time suffers these judgments to ring out their horrid peal over those we love laid low in death, so he teaches us to regard him as the only competent governor of these forces of nature, and leads us to the exercise of righteousness in an humble trust in his Almighty arm.

These illustrations of the position before us are amply sufficient. I need not dwell upon the other great agents on which man has so confidently reposed for the accomplishment of his purposes; nor detail here the character of that explosive force, by which war has been changed from the sword to the musket—from the catapult to the cannon. You cannot have forgotten the fearful judgment of the Almighty, when that huge instrument of death, named almost in seeming mockery, if not in pride, "*the peace-maker*," hurled its ponderous masses among the gay revellers on board the Princeton, and laid the chiefs of the nation low in the grave. Oh! how loudly do such scenes rebuke our vain confidence in any earthly agency, and teach us the impotence of man's boasted almightiness, and warn us not to forget that power above us, in whose grasp all these elements and agencies of the material creation are but the merest toys of childhood.

III. It is the design of Jehovah, in his general judgments, to rebuke our national sins. Individual offences meet with peculiar judgments. The victim of licentiousness reaps in his own frame and spirit the seed he has sown. The robber is made to feel in due time something of the avenging power of law upon his own person. And when crime of any kind becomes general, when it rises into such importance as to infect the community at large and become a national sin, then is it always right to regard the general judgments sent upon the people, as designed to rebuke and reform the general crime. When judgments fall upon great masses of men, when the individual is merged in the multitude and the calamity becomes so great as to resound through the country and affect the national heart, then may we rest assured that God is thus reminding us of some wide-spread national offence, and in the sternest language bidding us reform or perish. It is only by some fearful stroke of his providence, by some vast conflagration, some far-reaching pestilence, some appalling triumph of the great forces of nature over man and his bulwarks of safety, that God can speak to nations in rebuke of their enormous crimes. Should he speak to our magistrates as did Moses to Pharaoh, yet would he be obliged to send along with it the plagues that struck deep into the national

heart; should he write upon the walls of our capitol, the fearful scroll that blazed forth upon the sacrilegious feasters of Belshazzar its enigmatical terror, yet must a Cyrus penetrate that massive and seemingly impregnable Babylon, in order to impress its truth upon the nation at large. As only he, who, in the greatness of his sovereignty, fully controls the elements of national ruin, can permit them to coalesce anywhere and do their fearful work, so he alone speaks through them to us; and that in a language which none need misunderstand.

These national offences, in the main the same for a quarter of a century past, have been too marked and prominent to need enumeration. But were it necessary to fix upon any sin for which we in this section of our country are most directly responsible, there would be found among them two that could not be past by. Of these the desecration of the Sabbath demands distinct mention. Long years ago it had become so prevalent as to awaken the most intense anxiety, among the men who feared God, for our national integrity and permanent prosperity. And, though a few years have witnessed a decided improvement in some sections of the country, yet this is barely sufficient to warrant hope for the future, not enough to secure us from the curse that of right should descend upon present crime. Despite all the efforts of philanthropy and religion, in the midst of great and increasing light shed around this holy day, from the ascertained harmony of it with the providence, as well as with the word of Jehovah, our ears are still assailed, and that too at the very doors of our sanctuaries, by the rattling of stages, the hiss of the locomotive, the bell of the steamboat and the horn of the packet. With the Bible in their hands there are found multitudes who count it a day for merely sensual indulgence, fashionable display, riotous pleasure or slothful rest; with the holiest of covenants upon their lips, there are found professed Christians, who in mere matters of secular business, will suffer themselves to violate the morning or the evening of these hallowed hours by travelling, and that too in cars, stages and steamboats. With such looseness of opinion and practice in some of the church, and so all-pervading an hostility to the sacredness of this day among the world, is it wonderful that the poor orphans on our canals, with the vast army of boatmen that throng these miniature rivers, pleading with united voice for the privilege of rest on the Sabbath, have for several years been spurned from the walls of the capitol of the largest and wealthiest and most populous state in the Union? When such things exist; when public convenience is made to ride over public morals; when the gain or the pleasure of the few is regarded as paramount to the dictates of conscience, and the authority of God's word; when state and national legislatures do not hesitate to extend their sessions into the hours con-

secrated to Jehovah;* when the national executive, in almost the only form of national action that touches at once all parts of the country, and simultaneously extends its arms from New Orleans to Bangor, still maintains, to a large extent, the Sabbath mails, and compels the army of government officials in this department to sacrifice their richest privilege to the mercenary spirit of clamorous Sabbath-breakers; when these and other things like them exist, it is obvious that reformation has but begun, and that we may expect that judgment in fierce bolts will fall upon us, and the voice of God echoed in our burning cities, in our wrecked steamers, shall be uttered loudly in rebuke of our fearful Sabbath desecration.

So broadly marked also, and still so prominent is the vice of intemperance in the nation, that it cannot be for a moment forgotten. It meets us in the tavern; it meets us at the polls; it meets us in the numberless grogeries, that like the purlieus of the pit open their doors all over our state; it meets us in the gay and fashionable saloon, where the sparkling champagne opens the portals to the steep descent of inebriation, and begins the dance of revelry that ends in the darkness of the grave; it even glares upon us from the deck of the steamboat, and these magnificent floating palaces, with all their luxurious tables and costly provision for the comfort of the traveller, are still polluted by the gay dram-shop, where the young may find seduction, and the old confirmation in the ways of the inebriate. That great advances have been made in the overthrow of this evil is too obvious to need remark. That much remains to be done in settling the great principles on which this cause shall permanently rest, so as to command universally the assent of all classes of the moral and the intelligent, and that a vast work opens before us in educating the coming generation so that they shall be Rechabites in practice, and the sparkling wine cup shall cease to be the pledge of friendship, is equally obvious. Nor is it to be wondered at, while this and kindred vices prevail so extensively, if judgments of the most appalling character should sometimes fall upon us, and that too as the *direct result of a vitiated public sentiment on this whole subject*. In instances not a few, the most fearful public calamities are traceable to the agency of those who were the guilty victims of this degrading habit. Were the whole truth to be told, as it will be in that day when no earthly interests will avail to conceal it, we doubt not that the connection between intemperance and judgment would be revealed in a thousand cases where it is now unsuspected or unknown. And it becomes us to remember that all those who

* This sacrilege is not peculiar to our national Congress. Even the respectable Senate of New York, under the excitement of a partisan warfare, without the least show of necessity, occupied a portion of the first hour of the Sabbath preceding their final adjournment for this year, in an angry debate.

contribute to form a public sentiment which tolerates this vice in any class of men, be they senators or magistrates—be they public servants or private citizens, are directly responsible for the desolating judgments which it brings down upon the nation. From the relations between them, the innocent may be involved with the guilty in the dreadful sweep of a public calamity; but the responsibility of its origin and its curse, will ultimately rest only on those who either prepared the material or fired the train. In reference, therefore, to this and other national vices, these national judgments have a voice of stern rebuke and wholesome chastisement.

Finally. These wide-spread and affecting judgments are designed to teach men at once the insecurity of wealth and of life. Falling upon us, as they have done of late, with appalling rapidity; wrapping in flames our cities and villages; devouring in a few hours the monuments of the past and the garnered wealth of the present; compelling thousands to encamp beneath the open sky who once were the tenants of palaces; whelming multitudes in an instant beneath the waters, on which our vessels have hitherto floated as securely as when moored at our wharves, they demonstrate most convincingly the transient nature of property, the insecurity of life; they enforce, with fearful emphasis, the exhortations of scripture, "Set your affections on things above." "Be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." There are few, if any events, that afford a more terrible demonstration of the insecurity and transient nature of earthly possessions, than that of a vast conflagration. And of late these have multiplied to an extent unparalleled in our history. Their awful voice rebukes our national love of gain, our grasping after treasure, our miserable ambition to wield the power of immense revenues, and transmit to our posterity the name and the fortune of a Cræsus. They tell us to disburse our treasure, where it will fertilize the moral desert; where it will rebuild our ruined humanity; where it will open the eyes of the blind, and bind up bleeding hearts, and reveal to benighted millions the riches of the gospel and the treasures of immortality. As you gaze upon the rage and the devastation of this fierce element, behold the perishable nature of the monuments of art—of the products of industry—of the glory of wealth. Let each of us be most solicitous to lay up a treasure where flames cannot reach it; where the waves cannot bury it; where time cannot corrupt it. Thus profiting by these judgments of the Most High, our wealth will enrich the wastes of the world, our hearts will attain an habitual readiness to meet the great conqueror, come he in the fire or in the flood, on the land or on the ocean, suddenly or after protracted illness. Let us first of all see to it that our own individual lives are more pure, more benevolent, more truly Christ-like, and then let us bear our country on our hearts before the mercy-seat, and plead with Him who sits regent

above the forces of nature, and controls the elements of national ruin, to grant us the aid of his omnipotence to secure to our nation the highest temporal and spiritual prosperity. *Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thy heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them; wherefore should they say among the people, where is their God?*